



Demonology

Gal. 1:11-19

Luke 8:26-29

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning's account of the healing of a man possessed by a demon provides an opportunity to talk about the Orthodox Church's whole teaching concerning demons—it is what is known as "demonology".

Demons, we know, are fallen angels, those who followed their leader, Lucifer, in rebelling against God. Their number is legion, and we know that, in their hatred for God they prowl about all of creation, particularly here on the earth, which is their special domain when they are not in hell, for they try to create hell here on earth by seeking to draw us into their seductive nets and away from God. This much is pretty much known by all traditional Christians, I think. But unfortunately our dominant culture and modern man has decided that the devil and his minions don't exist, that they are simply figments of our imagination, the result of ignorance and superstition.

This, of course, is exactly what the Evil One wishes us to think: that he doesn't exist—for this leaves us unprotected and opens us quite completely to his influence.

However, knowing that Satan is real and that the fallen angels, the demons, are here and all around us, is not enough. We must also have some understanding of how they seek to approach and influence us, and how we can protect ourselves. All of this information, this teaching, has been preserved by the Church from the very beginning, but for some reason we don't often talk about it these days, especially here, in the decadent Western world. This is unfortunate, and even unbelievable, because there has never been a time in history when the presence and activity of the devil is more clear than today. But it is true.

It is easy enough, perhaps, to recognize and accept the reality of demonic possession—it has been the subject of much literature, both fiction and non fiction as well as film, some of it quite accurate, some of it not at all; some of it sobering, some of it sensationalized.



More important than knowing about possession, however, is to realize that the activity of fallen angels around us, and their attempts to influence us, is constant and no one of us is immune from their attacks. This is what we need to speak more of.

In last week's sermon about the Holy Fathers of the 7th Council of the Church I mentioned that the age of the Fathers has never come to an end, for there are genuine Church Fathers in every age, every time. One of the more recent ones is St. Theophan the Recluse, a righteous saint of the Russian Orthodox Church who died in 1896—and therefore is "of our time." In his long years of reclusion he was extremely interested in all of the spiritual forces, both angelic and demonic, that were operating in his time and in his culture, and as a spiritual father—he gave spiritual direction by means of literally thousands of letters to his spiritual children, some of which letters have survived and have been translated into English and published—he spoke about the question of demonic activity in the world. I want share with you this morning some of the things he wrote.

For example, he showed how "the body is the dwelling place of the passions, and chiefly of the fiercest ones, such as lust and anger. *It is also the organ through which the demons penetrate into the soul to come to settle near it.*"

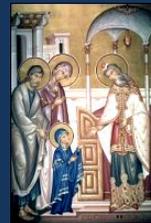
Notice what he has just said: that demons come to settle near the soul whenever and wherever possible. This is their "natural", so-to-speak, behavior; they cannot help themselves; they have a "target", and that "target" is the human soul. Not just some souls, but all souls. Yours and mine, too. And they aim themselves, like arrows, at us. St. Theophan calls these "enemy strikes."

Elsewhere St. Theophan explained that self-love and egotism are the qualities that especially act as magnets in attracting the attention of demons to our souls. These darken the soul, and it is this very darkness that attracts the demons.

These arrows, these "enemy strikes," he says, "often go unnoticed due to their subtlety and depth"—especially in children, by the way, which is why close parental guidance and supervision is so critical. He writes that demons attack our consciousness and free will so that we are cut off from our spiritual life for the moment, thus placing us in extreme danger.

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"This is the horde" of demons, he says, "that is ready every minute to extinguish our new life opposed to sin....The demons, the source of all evil, surround people with their horde and teach them every sin, working through the flesh, especially the senses... That," he continues, "is why they can be considered the cause of every passion and sinful attack. But there is something in this cycle of sins that only the demons could whip up...that is, blasphemous thoughts—doubts, lack of faith, unusual revulsion, darkening of the mind."

St. Theophan also gives the following warning: there isn't a single moment in the day when one of these demons is not trying to strike us. "Therefore," he says, "the chief form in which the enemy appears in us is [through our] *thought[s]*." And it is in the realm of thoughts that we find our battleground with the Evil One. And a true battleground it is.

Speaking of this battleground, and the battles we must fight therein, St. Theophan cautions that these battles are hard and bloody and we will suffer. Therefore, he writes, "provide yourself with only one thing, strong courage: no matter what happens, stay with what you have begun...no matter how life goes, whatever successes and failure there are... [For] the adversary will not sleep."

"God's saints," he continues (being himself one of those saints!) "God's saints noted that he [the devil] operates on those who are just beginning in two ways." (I quote this, brothers and sisters, because all of us are really only still just "beginners", aren't we?) "Two ways: Some [the devil] does not disturb at all and does not put up any opposition. Those who do not encounter inward or outward impediments and who see that everything is going smoothly begin to fantasize that this is the way things are, and they suppose that they have driven out all adversaries...As soon as such thoughts have settled in, the adversary immediately enters and begins fabricating vainglorious dreams from which are born self-conceit, the falling away from God's help, and the cessation of searching and striving after this help...and the poor conceited person falls."

This is the *first* way in which, the saints tell us, the Evil One works on us, and it is the most common way.

The second is as follows:

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"The enemy attacks others with all his force and swiftness from the very start... No matter where such a person turns, everything is against him in his thoughts and senses. Outwardly it is apparent only that things are going contrary to his good intentions and that nothing is favorable. The adversary does this to frighten the [beginner] and make him give up his good intentions and return to his careless and inattentive life. [But if the devil] notices that [the beginner] does not yield, but instead is holding his ground, *he immediately backs off*. A courageous stand against the adversary serves as a crown to the toilers, and he [the devil] does not want to furnish them with such crowns. Keep in mind, then, that in case of heavy pressure, *not* to be frightened; know that this is a trap of the adversary that he will give up as soon as he detects your steadfastness."

So there, brothers and sisters, is some valuable help for us from a contemporary Holy Father of the Church. But here I've given just a small glimpse, a snapshot, if you will, of the tremendous wisdom and experience the Church has stored up for us to draw upon in our difficult walk on the narrow path to the Kingdom of Heaven.

So many today, even in the Church, are no longer aware of this "unseen warfare" going on all around us between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Yes, we see it in the world's events, in the news, in wars and other catastrophes and disasters, both manmade and those allowed by God through nature; so, yes, we see *that* struggle between good and evil "out there." But we have forgotten that this struggle is also going on *around* and *within* each and every one of us, from the moment of our birth—for the fallen angels never need to sleep or rest, being bodiless--, and this struggle will continue until death and even immediately after death, when those fallen angels will then try to claim our souls. They will not succeed in doing so, of course, so long as we have "fought the good fight" in this life, arming ourselves with the wisdom and many profound tools that the Church wishes to give us in order to defend ourselves against the wiles of the devil.

But if we do not know those "wiles," and if we do not know what the "tools" or weapons are to deal with them, *what will become of us?*

These, then, are the kinds of things we should think upon when we read a Gospel such as we heard in this morning's Liturgy. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.